

The Road to Happiness by nerdsarehot75

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Summary:

When someone hurts Joyce, Hopper just won't stand for it.

The Road to Happiness

Hopper pulled up at the general store, planning on buying some cigarettes and checking up on how Will was doing. Joyce had mentioned she would be back at work today and he was anxious to see her. They hadn't had a moment alone since what had happened. He was worried about how she was getting on.

He could see her, sitting outside, a cigarette in one hand and a thoughtful look on her face. He'd planned it so he'd run into her on her lunch break. Despite the freezing air she looked comfortable enough and the sunlight and shadows playing across her skin held him enraptured.

He watched as some man with greying hair approach her and felt a clenching in his stomach. She stood up uncertainly. He stepped out of the car, slowly edging closer to see what the man was saying. From the closed off expression and set jaw it wasn't good.

"They should just take your kids away. You're a terrible mother," the man said, stepping forwards causing Joyce to shrink back. Hopper could see the glimmer of sadness in her eyes and his fists clenched at his side.

"You lost one to be experimented on. I'm sure the other one is just as fucked up," the man said, his hand reaching out to grab her. "How can you look at yourself in the mirror?"

"Joyce," Hooper greeted, unable to take it a moment longer, the rage building in him.

"Hop," she said, instantly straightening her posture.

"Just came by to ask after Will," he said, stepping over to her side.

"He's doing great," she said, smiling up at him.

"You're a piece of shit and he should be taken away," the man interrupted. Hopper scowled at him.

"I'm giving you one chance to walk away," he growled.

"You're defending her? That monster?" the other man asked, incredulous.

Hopper's fist connected with his jaw causing a cracking noise. The man fell backwards, his palms scraping against the ground. Hopper kicked out, catching him in the stomach and all the air flooded out. He coughed as he struggled to his feet.

"You're just as bad as she is," the man said before swinging his own fist. It grazed the side of Hopper's head. He punched the other man,

catching him in the ribs and bringing his other fist around to hit his nose. Blood spurted out of it and the man fell to his knees.

Hopper felt a cold hand on his arm, pulling him back, away from the bleeding man. He couldn't hear anything Joyce was saying, the blood still rushing in his ears but her frantic eyes brought him back into the present. He gazed at her, trying to comprehend the last few minutes. Her wide eyes were checking him over, catching on his knuckles where bruises were forming. He was distracted by the hair falling over her face and gently pushed it away, tucking a few strands behind her ear.

"I'll get you some ice," she said before disappearing back inside.

In those few moments alone he gathered his thoughts. He couldn't regret what he'd done. That man had hurt Joyce and maybe she wouldn't admit it but he could read her so easily. She didn't deserve that kind of abuse and he'd be damned if she ever suffered it again.

She came back out, pressing the ice to his hand, holding it in her's. Her hands were shaking slightly and he felt bad for causing that. With his free hand he touched her elbow and she jumped before giving him a sheepish smile that quickly turned into a frown.

"You shouldn't have done that," she said.

"He was out of line," he replied, shrugging.

"Was he?" Her voice was almost too quiet to hear.

"You're the best mother I know. Anyone can see that," he said.

"He was right. I let my son get taken," she whispered.

"No, you fought to get him back," he stated. Joyce blinked. "You believed he was still alive, even when everyone said you were crazy."

"You helped," she said.

"Only because you insisted he was out there. You made me believe," Hopper answered.

"You still shouldn't have punched him," she deflected, looking around him into the now empty parking lot.

"If he complains I'll tell them he was harassing you," he replied, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Why did you?" she asked.

"What?" his brows scrunched in confusion.

"Punch him," she said.

"Because he hurt you," he answered.

"You didn't have to," she said

"Of course I did," he replied

"Why?" she asked, her own eyebrows coming together.

"Because I care about you. Christ Joyce, haven't you realised that yet?" he said. She looked at him, at a loss for words. Her mouth opened then closed and she directed her attention back down to his hand.

"I don't think there'll be much swelling," she said, lifting the ice up.

"That's good," he replied, a small smile working its way onto his face.

"And Will has been asking about you. He wants to know if you'll be dropping in soon. I think he wants to thank you properly," she rushed on.

"I'll stop by after work but he doesn't have to thank me," he said, ducking his head.

"He thinks you're a hero." She smiled.

"You're the real hero," he replied, smiling back at her. Their eyes caught and they stood gazing at one another. Her thumb was absentmindedly tracing circles on his palm and a shiver ran through him. He ducked his head down towards her, waiting for her to draw back, her eyes fluttered close and her lips parted.

The door slammed open and Donald stood there. They jumped apart, the ice clattering to the ground between them.

"Your break is over," Donald informed them. Joyce made to leave but Hopper caught her wrist. She looked down at it as if something alien was attached to her.

"I'll come over after work tonight," he said. She nodded once before disappearing back inside.

The porch light was shining as Hopper pulled up. A few flakes of snow fell in the light from his car before he switched it off. He sat for a moment, watching the surrounding woods for any sign of movement, worried even now. He climbed out of the car and walked up to the door, stopping a moment to watch a moth fluttering around the light. He took a deep breath and knocked.

The door opened to reveal Jonathan, framed by the light streaming out behind him. He smiled and beckoned Hopper inside, calling out to Joyce. Her head popped out from the kitchen to smile at him and he couldn't help but smile back.

Will walked up, his hand outstretched. Hopper looked at Joyce then back to the boy, and shook his hand. Will smiled at him and followed him into the kitchen.

"I didn't mean to come at an inconvenient time," he said, watching Joyce and Jonathan moving around the room, preparing the meal.

"Nonsense. You're staying for dinner," Joyce brushed off, giving up control to her older son and happily being shooed out of the kitchen. Hopper sat beside her on the couch, legs almost touching. Will was telling them about the game he'd been playing with his friends earlier and Hopper kept sneaking glances at Joyce. Her eyes were lit up as she watched her son, a smile gracing her face. She laughed along with him and Hopper couldn't help but think she was the most beautiful person he'd met.

Dinner was comfortable. The boys talked about their day and Joyce didn't bring up the fight. She watched both her boys and the aura of happiness was almost palpable around her. Jonathan shot looks between Hopper and Joyce, and Hopper pretended not to notice.

With the two growing boys it was a fast affair, food quickly cleaned from plates. When Hopper began to clear the table Joyce took the plates from his hands, shooting him a look as she did so.

"You don't have to do that," she said.

"Let me help, it's the least I can do," he said, taking the plates back and dumping them beside the sink. He began running water as she stood beside him, visibly working on an argument. "I want to help."

He washed and she dried. Standing beside one another it felt incredibly domestic but also as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Will and Jonathan were in the living room, their voices drifting in to fill the silence between the two adults.

The house looked better since the last time Hopper had been there. All the lights had been taken down and the hole in the wall had been fixed. The black letters were still painted on the wall but he was sure by Christmas they'd be gone too.

Joyce looked better too. With a full night's sleep and the stress of Will's disappearance gone she was like the girl he'd known in school. She smiled more and her eyes held that twinkle that Lonnie had taken away. He smiled as their fingers brushed while he handed her a fork. She smiled back, before ducking her head to hide it.

"I should go," he said as she dried the last knife.

"You don't have to," she replied.

"You should spend time with your boys."

"You could stay. They won't mind."

He just smiled at her and turned to leave. It wasn't until he was back at his car and she called his name that he realised she'd followed him out in the cold. His immediate response was to rub her bare arms, her coat forgotten inside in her haste.

"It's probably not safe to be driving this late," she said, stepping closer to his warmth.

"I'll be fine," he replied.

"There's snow on the road and it's dark," she tried again.

"Joyce, I'll be fine," he said.

"Why are you being so stubborn?" she asked, more to herself than him.

"What are you talking about?"

"What I'm trying to say is I care about you too."

She pulled him down by his collar and her lips attacked his. He moaned, and pulled her in by her waist, his hands easily spanning it in their grip. She whimpered. He clutched her to him, desperate to feel her, safe and whole, and so very real. Her hands threaded through his hair, tugging slightly and he groaned. She tried to pull back but he followed her, needy, craving her closeness and her love. She broke away laughing. He buried his head in her neck, placing searing kisses to the skin he found there and the laughter quickly stopped. He kissed her again, sloppier than before, all tongue and teeth and she melted into him.

The door to the house shot open and the two sprang apart for the second time that day. Jonathan was looking back, saying something at Will, not having seen them yet.

"Come back inside," she asked again. She took his hand and led him back towards the house, any complaints dying on his lips when Jonathan smiled at them.

"Everything alright?" he asked them, closing the door on the cold once they'd entered the warm light of the house.

"Everything's perfect." Joyce smiled. "Hop is going to stay for a while. Is that okay?"

"That's fine. Will'll be happy," Jonathan replied. He passed them, grinning in that knowing way that teenagers had. Joyce stifled a smile and pushed Hopper into the living room to pass a wonderful evening in the Byers' house, Joyce by his side, everyone safe and happy. He thought it was as close to heaven as he could get.